Fractals

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Fractals

by drinkbloodlikewine, whiskeyandspite

Summary

"Like a watch gone still, the movements of your mind need care. You would not accept my gift, but I will give it to you despite, by force, if necessary."

A **fractal** is a natural phenomenon, or a mathematical set, that exhibits a *repeating pattern that displays at every scale.*

Notes

For a lovely person who wishes to remain unnamed, but who requested: "Hannibal kidnapping Will, for non-sexy reasons, almost in the style of Miriam Lass. But then decides to make Will love him for his own benefit, and then he (Hannibal) gets caught up in it too."

We hope we did it justice for you, love, we hope we made it hurt enough and the payoff was worth it. We had a hell of a time writing this, it was so much fun, and we would be honored to write anything else for you, should you wish it.

Also check out this amazing piece of art to go with the story!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The waves wash out.

Wine, a spilled glass to stain the front of his shirt. There is more, though, the entire bottle perhaps, spread across his shoulder, reddening his hands. Sticky thick against his face, too dark to be the drink, the bottle broke and has cut Hannibal's face, covered him in blood, cabernet crimson on a once pristine white backdrop.

You were supposed to leave.

And faster than it ebbed, the tide rushes back in.

He reaches for Will and Will doesn't flinch, doesn't blink, doesn't move or fight away from the glint of silver - like water, like glass - but Hannibal's hand strikes past him, knocks him aside to drag the girl back in the undertow. She fights against the current, tears at Hannibal's arm but the movement will not be stopped.

That place was made for all of us.

It breaks with a splash against the floor, dark and moonless, thick over Hannibal's hand that draws the knife across Abigail's throat, the same hands that once held it closed now tearing it open again.

Unmaking what was made.

Rending that which was brought whole again.

Together.

Will gasps for air above the water, and blinks unseeing into the darkness.

For a moment he's floating, not touching anything at all, then the weight of the floor seeps to his shoulders and he groans, stretching his back against the cold surface and bringing a hand to his eyes to press some form of vision to them. Sparks and stars and the vague pain of the pressure he's putting on the lids and then nothing.

Black.

The steady thud-thud-thud of his heart so thick it's as though a mallet is beating it into his ribs, teaching his heart to comply.

He draws his knees up, shivers. He doesn't want to think, doesn't want to float in the endless abyss of his mind when it has so much to explore and see. Will swallows. Forces his body still against the floor, and looks up. His vague idea of up. The concept of it. Here he could be upside down and buried. Perhaps he is.

Another swallow, another breath, and Will blinks, the darkness just as full behind his eyes as before it. The air is clean, though, cool, smells like nothing in particular. So not damp. Not stone. Not earth. He carefully lifts his arms to reach forward, seeking the wall ahead and finding none, spreading his arms to get a sense of his space and hitting nothing so he leaves them there, splayed. Not wood beneath his fingers, not metal. Smooth stone, the foundations of a house, perhaps, a well-kept cellar.

I gave you a gift.

His breathing echoes only a little, as though the space is cavernous enough for it, and Will doesn't even know if his eyes are open or closed anymore, and if it at all matters. He knows he's cold, his clothes still sticking to his skin from the remains of the rain within the fabric.

He thinks of Alana.

Closes his eyes and forces himself not to think of Alana.

He breathes harsher, enough to push a sound from his throat, enough to fill the void with it, to keep him stable, to ground him in something. It helps, sets his heart to beating slower, sets his breathing to ease. He does it again, clears his throat and swallows again.

His throat is dry. His mind is drowning.

"Okay." Words barely voiced but already howling in the silence around him. Will waits.

"Unbound," he lists, "no broken bones, no smell of blood." He licks his lips, brings his hands to them in the darkness, feeling the way they bend out of shape when he pushes, the way his face is mostly dry but for the drips from his hair. He touches the lids of his eyes again, gentle, flinches when he sees Abigail there, when he sees the blood flow hot and alive from her neck, when he feels it against his face, over his lips, down his throat.

"NO. No. No." Sighs, swallows.

Thud -
- Thud -
- Thud -

Will exhales. Starts again.

I let you know me.

Plunged, cold, beneath the waters that rush stronger against him, a brutal push and pull of memory, forward, backward, murky but for points of light that pierce through the bracken.

There were supposed to be police here, waiting, that's what he was told and that's what he had said and that's what he had tried to tell him to get him to run, goddammit, to run and get out and he turns to run himself and falls.

A gasp, suspended for a moment that might have been a lifetime, weightless as Hannibal's arm still hot with Abigail's blood snared swift around his neck instead.

Light glimmers bending in front of his eyes and Will swallows down enough air to bubble a laugh that sounds like drowning. He clings to Hannibal's arm, not to yank it away, but to keep himself standing for a moment more before the typhoon pulls him into the same black depths as all the others, the last light he will ever see, eyes closing in release, in knowing as he should have always known that there is no kindness in storms.

See me.

The needle slips beneath his skin so cleanly that he only feels it as the plunger sinks.

Spat back against the shore, Will staggers to his knees. He digs against the acid sting beneath his skin, spreading with every dull thud of pulse beat blood inside his head. Each beat pushes it deeper. Each movement mired heavier. Each breath deeper until he wonders if he is taking any at all.

Silver glints luminous bright beneath the dark and Will reaches, dull fingers brushing the blade enough to move it, to see the light refract across and then sparkle sharp as Hannibal pushes it towards him. He drops beside Will, the afterimages of his current standing bending squatting crouching and hands he has felt a hundred times are invisible to dead nerves but for the pressure of Hannibal setting the knife into Will's hand and forcing his fingers around it.

To seal.

To ensure.

The blade falls and he is jerked to his feet as if by a ripcord.

Black.

Will can feel his lungs expanding, contracting till they itch.

He sits, pushes against the hard floor with his shoes, back and back and back until he hits a wall, ducks his head, draws in air till his lungs can take it again. He can feel the knife against his palm and rubs it against his pants, over and over till the friction heats his thigh and he makes a soft noise and stops, setting the heels of his hands against his eyes.

Hot. Cold. Black. Blue. Red.

Red, red,
red,
redredredred--

“Unbound,” he gasps again. “No broken bones. No blood.”

But was that true? Perhaps he was covered in the stuff, perhaps soaked and chafed in it, dripping and slippery in it.

“No.”

Fingerprints on the murder weapon, fingerprints in the kitchen. He had no reason to be there, none at all to be there that day and yet he was, he had been. Jack had warned him. Will had assured him.

He parts his lips with a tongue that feels too hot and forces his breathing to steady.

Perhaps they weren't dead.

Perhaps someone had come.

The words waltz in his mind like a broken record and he shakes his head to set the needle straight again, hearing the clicking and white noise of his blood behind his ears. He takes a slow breath, releases it to the count of five. Inhales.

He does this three times.

Six times.

Nine.

"Hannibal?" his words are quiet, but they still hang in the air like a beacon before fading with another breath. Will lets one leg slip flat to the floor, leans back so his shoulders can straighten against this surface as they had the floor. He takes this weight on like Atlas and wonders what he's holding.

There is a squeak, a noise not Will's own to pierce the darkness. A thump, a thump, a thump that does not belong to him. Floorboards, pressing heavy overhead, above him and away again.

Fingertips find the rough knot on his neck that he hoped was not there, evidence missing that would render the rest of his memory inadmissible. The swollen tissue tightens as his jaw clenches, teeth bared around the man's name.

"Hannibal."

Louder now.

The footsteps stop, and return, steady.

"Hannibal!"

The word tears his throat. Echoes in the cellar. Bounces off the walls in sine waves almost visible when they oscillate through the pressure behind his eyes that bursts explosive when the cellar door opens with a bang.

Stillness, growing from the faintly echoing rapport, and a square of light luminous against the floor.

"You are awake." Somewhere between surprise and disappointment, his voice cools and disperses into the air. "I could not trust how you would behave to let you remain upstairs. You

understand. We must always protect our own interests, first."

"You should have finished the job if you did not want me to wake," Will says, voice rough, that one scream enough to feel his throat torn. Or perhaps just added to it. Perhaps he had torn it watching Abigail die.

"You should have listened," he adds, soft, not looking at the light now, that it's there. Watching it illuminate the dust motes meandering in the beam instead.

So much of dust is dead skin.

Dead cells.

Dead things everywhere and Will tenses, drawing straighter against the wall.

"Should have gone. That would have been in your best interests. In mine."

Hannibal draws a breath, a snort, dust or disdain or both.

"You always have been so astute when it comes to others," he intones softly. "Clever enough now to steal the words from my mouth."

Darkness eclipses the light, a monster swallowing the sun, and Hannibal settles at the top of the uneven wooden stairs in a low crouch.

Will's fingers twitch, the blade pressed sticky against his hand, the sensation shaken free by a quick jerk of wrist.

"You should have listened. Should have gone."

Long limbs resting against each other high on his perch, he is shaped in shadow, motionless. He seems to consider the stairs, the man pressed to the wall across from them, damp and dusty, unaware of how hard he shakes with the intensity of drugs leaving his system.

"But you have always been as poor a judge of yourself as you are a good study of others. So blinded by them that you cannot see your own desires, your own needs. Unable to see what is best for yourself. Unwilling to act upon it."

Will draws his lips back in what he hopes is a snarl. All he can feel is the vibrations of his breath against them, unsteady.

“I have never made you privy,” he says, terse, quiet, “To my desires, Hannibal, nor my needs. You cannot disguise your own actions as misplaced affection, or whatever you think this is.”

He does look up then, and the light pulses, like watching the sun from the ocean floor. It doesn’t time to his heart, he wonders if it times to Hannibal’s; steady and slow, a thick thud like the footsteps had been. Will feels a wave wash over him and shivers, brings his hands up to his eyes again.

“Are they dead?” he asks, voice grating.

He doesn't need to see Hannibal in the light to know that his eyes have twitched narrow, the slightest movement his body can pass by his utter control.

"Always more concerned with others before yourself," Hannibal intones softly. It is threat and kindness all at once, the whisper of wind in the eye of the storm. "Does it matter, Will? If I say yes or no, some or none or all. Will any of those answers assuage your guilt in their fate?"

He lowers a foot to the stair, heedless of the feral snarl that still curls Will's lips, cornered and fierce. Another step, and another, until finally he reaches the bottom, and stands, struck tall and tense.

A smile curves his lips, glinting sharp in the low lights.

"You did not need to make me privy for me to know, Will. To so transparently understand what you would not allow yourself to grasp. If I did not wish you to wake I would have made certain that you did not, but you must understand," he notes, gesturing with one hand, and then other, "the difference between merely being not-asleep, and awakening."

Will’s laugh feels like pebbles against glass.

“Always so clever with your words, *Doctor* Lecter. Always so deliberate with them. Do you ever hear yourself?” he swallows, thick, parts his lips, takes a breath.

Rinse, repeat.

Wave, retreat.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” Will allows after a moment, hands dropping to rest heavy against his thighs, his raised knee swaying a little as he keeps time with it to the slow pulse in his brain, a metronome.

“I suppose it never really did. I had warned them, both, I had told them not to come. They came. Much as I want to take it on myself, it isn’t something I can easily shift from one pair of shoulders to another.” Another swallow, a furrowing of his brows. He wants water. He wants to feel it soothe his parched throat, slip over his head and down his back, gathering at his feet, at his ankles and shins and knees and thighs and up and up and -

“I suppose the only thing that does is why I'm here.”

"With what other options was I presented, Will?" Hannibal drags his teeth on the words, feet carrying him closer. Fury bubbles in him, bursting against the surface. "Run, and leave you? Kill you? Blood on my hands, both."

"No," Hannibal answers, standing over Will, a presence that seems to fill the entire cellar with such shadow that even its native darkness is pushed out. Pressing closer to Will, the scent of blood washed from him by the rank smell of florid soap, he lowers himself to a crouch, reaches to stroke a hand through Will's hair.

"Like a watch gone still, the movements of your mind need care. You would not accept my gift, but I will give it to you despite, by force, if necessary."

There is heaviness in his touch, exhaustion curling and flexing his fingers in Will's wet hair. They seek to bend, grasp, tear - to find their purpose as claws again, to feel blood hot beneath his hand one last time tonight. Instead, he catches a curl, and shifts it softly into place.

"I could not leave without you, Will," Hannibal answers rueful, and tucks the side of his finger beneath Will's chin to lift it, ignoring for now the impulse to slap, strike, beat this man and drown him in the blood he has so rightly earned for his betrayal. Swallowing hard, Hannibal speaks softly through the undulations of anger the tug at him like the moon against the tides, allows them to move around him without overwhelming.

"I will wind the pieces of your thoughts back to when they kept beautiful time," Hannibal suggests.

"And if the clock is broken?" Will grits through his teeth, motionless beneath the hand, unresponsive.

Hannibal stands again, the attempted warmth sweeping cold from his voice. "Then I will dispose of it. I have no time for things that do not work as I know they should."

He dusts his hands off against his pants, and lifts one to examine his nails, cool.

"If I bring you upstairs - trust you, Will, again - for a bath, clothing, food, will you stay, or act out foolishly?" he asks, and adds softly, "Again."

Will allows his eyes to move with Hannibal to follow him up and for a moment says nothing. He considers. Whatever drugs are in his system have his mind firing synapses back and forth in camera-flash pops he can't control, that fall out of time with his metronome.

So he stops moving his knee.

He knows that until the tide rushes out and does not return to consume him, he will be trapped. Helpless and broken. A watch ticking out of tune.

He knows he is not in Hannibal’s home - such a thing would be far too rash for the man, now, with the amount of blood soaking the kitchen tiles to paint the grout red between the cool white granite - so he must be at one of Hannibal's chosen dens. Most likely far enough from the city to be unseen, close enough to return as he slowly gathers his life up with him to flee entirely.

Will thinks of cascades of falling pages.

Of snow.

Of cool water in a glass and swallows.

"I would like some water." He answers finally, honest, and adjusts his expression to softly wipe away foolishness.

Again.

Hannibal's lips thin, terse, as his question goes unanswered, but beyond a slight stretch through aching hands, he does not respond to this, yes. He does not grab Will by the throat and snarl his rage. He does not choke him into gasped promises of good behavior, of apology, of all the things that Hannibal's entire being aches to hear, the blood that he wants spilled from Will until it matches the wounds he feels between every rib and on every breath.

There is weight on his shoulders, almost unbearable, as Hannibal turns to go. Spine hunched, an animal in a man's body, coiled and kept at bay only by sheer force of will, he does not hesitate to give his back to the man. Will is drugged. Will is weak. Will would not act with such bravery as it would require to plunge more than an emotional knife into Hannibal's back, but that, the man feels, still lodged deep as he ascends the stairs, and slams the door to the cellar shut behind him.

Six foot by six foot.

Empty save for the staircase, seven paces, maybe eight. Solid, nothing Will can hide under should he have to.

Unfortunate but understandable.

He parts his dry lips with a drier tongue and maps out the upstairs by the way Hannibal moves within the space above him. He allows his rusty pendulum to creak, dry blood falling in soft flakes into the darkness with the rest of the dust as it moves.

Hannibal steps around an object, counter perhaps, pauses, turns, pauses. An alcove, then, no more than that, for a kitchen. The sound of water running drags through the pipes with a groan. Tank, then.

Out of town, as expected.

He wonders what the water will taste like.

Sixteen paces to the door and another pause.

Will lets his smile seep internal, opens his eyes as the door does.

“There is food, if you wish it. I know you do not often eat without me to feed you.” Words once spoken in jest, teasing and warm against the back of Will’s neck, now as cold as the steel in that kitchen seems in memory, words that bleed and drip clotted cold.

He hands Will the cup - plastic, not glass. To protect himself from what Will might try to do to him, to protect Will from himself should he turn a shard that way instead.

“Forgive me for not including ice,” Hannibal murmurs. “If the water is too cold, you will be sick from it. It is harder on the body to absorb it chilled.”

Hannibal does not let himself linger near, hardly lets himself look at the man still curled on the floor in this place where so many have come before him. All unworthy, the world of

them, compared to Will, who now sits here as though he were one of them.

Weak.

Fallible.

Human.

He loved that in him, once.

Hannibal sits across from him, on the stairs, hands against his knees.

“You do not have to stay down here,” he suggests again.

Will drinks hungrily, does not disguise it as anything but what it is. He can feel a headache building behind his eyes like a storm and forces himself to take the last several sips slowly, until the glass rests almost entirely weightless in his hands.

"Don't I?" he asks gently.

He can hear the tide but no longer feel it, a pounding on the shore he has climbed away from, for a time. He allows his eyes to scan the man in front of him, best as he can, haloed in light, featureless, entirely indistinguishable from any other if Will did not know that silhouette so well, from every angle.

He considers how angels are written to be fierce, faceless. Considers how many fell from grace with Lucifer.

Considers how he would rather the drink in his hand be whiskey.

"You brought me down here,” he reminds Hannibal, but there is less accusation now, more an exhausted sort of understanding, honing in on familiar words, familiar sensations they bring to mind that Will forces himself to remember as good, not register as frightening, now.

"Yes. And seeing how you woke, it remains the correct choice."

Hannibal splays his fingers, catches them in the light, clean and pale, elegant fingers no longer glistening in darkness but illuminated bright. He studies them, head tilting, the destruction in them, the creation.

"But if you will stay, then I will open the door for you. You may come upstairs, sit for dinner, bathe or change your clothes. God forbid we become friendly."

He makes no move to stand, to ease the tension still visible in the rise of his shoulders, the press of his hands together, the feral tilt of his head to tug against the tendons still stretched tight.

"It would make little sense for you to leave. We shoulder this burden together, now, it is not only my acts or yours that drove me to them. They would not believe you even if you attempted reason with them. They have never believed you entirely, Will."

A pause, long enough to let the silence settle among the dust.

"I believed you."

A gentle furrow of his brow, a swallow, gliding easier now, down a soothed throat, and Will says nothing for a time, listens to the waves recede.

In truth, they never had believed him. Jack had tried to make amends and Will could still feel the cold wariness weigh on him with every word the man spoke. A doubt. Cloying and lingering, like perfume too thick to dissipate. Jack had tried, he had not succeeded.

Alana had tried.

Will turns his head. He does not think of Alana.

Abigail...

Never once. A clear connection with Hannibal, manipulative and beautiful as he is.

Will had learned, then, had allowed his skin to change like a snake, leaving behind the softer, safer, saner. He had let his pendulum rust.

He didn't need it when he was living the things he had once so feared, when that new skin felt warmer than the old. A novelty, perhaps, but one he enjoyed. As he had the lingering fingertips against his skin, the parted lips that followed.

"Yes," he responds, inside his own mind an echo of his former self moans the word. "You did."

He lets his eyes lift once more, focusing on Hannibal, long enough for features to make themselves clearer, for him to read not only the exhaustion in his shoulders but the weight of it on his brow. It softens him.

Sixteen paces from the stairs to the counter.

Six feet by six feet in the alcove above.

Rinse, repeat.

"Will you believe me now?"

Wave, retreat.

The sky is clear above the sea, pierced by stars that glint bright from the ruin washing against the shore beneath their feet. Laid bare, the inner workings and the collateral damage, beyond recognition from what once was.

What once may have been.

Ill-fated and poorly planned.

Weakened by mutiny and treason.

Overcome by forces into which they bore headfirst.

And still, Hannibal stands. And still, the word sits foul and heavy on his tongue. And still, he leaves the door open behind him as he goes, without another look back towards Will.

"No."

There is no sympathy in storms.

Chapter 2

The waves wash in.

There is no shower, here, the house too old to accommodate for such recent indoor plumbing and Will has to laugh a little, voice echoing off the water, off the copper tub.

It must be gnawing at Hannibal's skin to be somewhere so unrefined.

He bathes only long enough to feel his skin again, the sweat and blood and rain sluiced away into the water before Will stands from it to feel it peel from his skin and take the remainder of his nausea with it.

In appearance.

Enough, for the moment to calculate the steps needed to get to the door. Enough to understand that it will be locked from the inside.

There are few windows.

There are no lights outside.

Will dresses in a shirt he recognizes the smell of, forces his senses to dull to it, to not remember the feeling of it under his fingers as he had sunk slowly to his knees and skimmed down the button line.

His pants he keeps as his own, damp but wearable. He leaves his shoes.

“Civet de lapin. Rabbit stew, cooked with red wine and root vegetables.”

Non-stick pans and mismatched dishes. Dried herbs in place of fresh. Wine half-used and discarded, an American name across the peeling label.

Substitutions, from the aged wooden table to the unpressed shirt that hangs ill-fitted against Hannibal’s frame.

A mimicry, cruel enough to seem a mockery, at whose expense remains unclear.

“Please, sit.”

Will does, without fanfare, without a centerpiece or cloth napkins, without a further glance beyond one that lingers only long enough to judge him settled enough into his chair for Hannibal to return the pot to the stove, and dial it to a simmer. He reaches, watching the man’s back as he works, and finds only a spoon beneath his fingers.

“I’m not -”

“You are,” Hannibal interjects, with a terseness that he rarely allows to seep into his voice, pressed through the widening cracks by the pressures of exhaustion and frustration. “And you will eat.”

Will’s stomach coils, a slithering serpentine thing and he breathes carefully through his mouth. He does not allow his stomach to register the taste as good, is not naive enough to think the meat truly rabbit.

He finds, at least, that there is another glass of water for him, and that he drinks eagerly. It cools him, soothes him, settles. He sets the glass aside and watches as Hannibal turns to serve them, ladling the stew thick and hearty into the only bowls he has. It drowns the faded peonies until barely the petals remain.

"It smells delicious,” he admits, "but then, your food always did."

Will's lips curl carefully inwards before he releases them with a sigh, takes up his spoon.

"Death sustaining life."

Hannibal waits until Will brings the stew to his mouth, tastes it, a shudder of movement as he swallows it, and only then turns towards his own.

“Does.”

Across the small table, Will’s eyes lift, but his head does not follow the movement.

“Smell delicious. My food always *does*.”

It is a slight, however unintentional, the drugs easing from the man’s speech and leaving it unsteady. Pale skin and a paler smile that appears, false, Hannibal knows, it must be, false as his platitudes and his philosophies.

As much a mockery of what once was as the meal before them, unacceptably less than what it should have been in another time and another place.

Another life, now concluded, and revived as a shambling reanimation.

Hannibal sets his spoon down, no taste for the bitter dried flakes of oregano that should be whole leaves freshly cut from his garden or the meat that tastes of stale freezer or for Will, still as the rabbit he eats - though Hannibal knows he would not believe it to be that - once sat in a field as the hunter leveled the creature in his sights. Avoiding attack by maintaining as much motionlessness as one can.

Eyes close, and a breath fills Hannibal’s lungs, held long, and sighed towards the cabin’s bare rafters.

“I am glad you are here,” he says, finally, to fill the gaps gouged between them, and he’s surprised to find, after he’s said it, that he means it. “Time enough to rebuild. To understand why. To see each other, finally, perhaps, without masks.”

"I would very much like to understand *why*," Will responds, careful to eat around the meat, preferring to dig vegetables out of the stew and play with them more than eating them. He does only when Hannibal levels him with a look.

"I have seen you since prison," he adds, voice tilting at the end on what would, in anyone else, be amusement or a question. Head tilted, smile false but present, a mockery of friendship as the dinner is a mockery of normalcy. "I have seen the antlers grow from your skull, black and branching. No longer formless, as you once were to me."

It's a sting, deliberate, and Will sets his spoon down again, folding his fingers together and leaning closer.

"Please, do, Hannibal, make me understand why you did what you did and why I woke alive, when you so clearly regret the decision."

The prey stirs, and the predator now goes still. Poised. But for a narrowing of eyes as Will leans nearer over the table, however slightly, Hannibal is unmoving.

Unmoved.

"I do not regret it, yet," he says softly. "I did not imagine I would, but you seem insistent on making it so. This is an opportunity, Will, that I did not have to afford you. That I have not afforded anyone else."

Between them, the food, the room, the air itself cools, a draft from the storm still pelting down outside, perhaps, but for the fact that there is no movement between them.

A dire frost, creeping cold as Hannibal turns his head an increment, a reptilian movement, unnatural in its precision to better hold Will in his sights.

"With all your cleverness - all your vaunted understanding of others - do you truly need to ask me why? That is my question, Will, not yours, and in answering mine you will have the answer to your own. Why lie to me, when I gave you chances to speak truth? Why provide false consolations and falser comforts when the truth would have set us both free?"

He pauses, and his lips twitch.

"It would have kept them alive."

Will swallows, eyes narrowing, adjusting his position to mirror Hannibal perhaps without even knowing. A predator facing a predator.

"What's another few names to your already bulging ledger," Will hisses, soft, "I doubt my actions would have saved Jack his fate. Certainly not Abigail's."

He does not mention Alana.

"It was the first time I was honest, then," he adds softly. "Telling you to go. To run. Perhaps therein lay my error, putting trust in the humanity of a shell that surrounds a monster within."

Will swallows, hears the waves hum behind him, no longer a threat but always there, never quiet.

"You will not convince me of the rightness of your truth," he tells him, tilting his head to watch Hannibal, this time, mirror. "Do you believe me?"

"No."

Hannibal leans back, forcing himself to present as less poised than he is. He lets his shoulders slack and folds his hands in his lap and with a swallow reminds himself that they are here. They are here together.

They are here together and alive.

"They were not," he mutters, "names in a ledger. I would like to think you are simply being as cruel as I know you are able, but I think you believe those words and I think it tells me much about how genuine you think I have ever been with you."

He folds his hands together, and they tighten.

"How genuine you have ever been with me. Nothing exists in a void, Will. Not you nor your actions, nor myself or my own. No matter how inhuman you would like to consider me," he pauses, tongue curling against his teeth, mouth closed, to take in the flavor of such bitterness.

"They were our friends. Our daughter," Hannibal breathes. "Our life entire, that we were building together." His voice hisses low, sharp, though he stays still, it sharpens sinuous past his lips. "A stage play for you to play the hero. You should not be surprised to see the set struck down and its players dismissed when the run has ended."

"The hero for no one, for most of the play," Will reminds him, eyes narrowed further still, pushing himself to sit back, running the side of his thumb roughly over his bottom lip, again and again, in a self-soothing gesture that still speaks of disbelief - perhaps denial.

"Cast as the villain when I attempted genuine heroism," he swallows, eyes up. "By you."

He does not let the soft words sway him, does not allow his heart to ease and slow like a rodent hypnotized by a cobra. He does not allow his mind to ease into the rhythm of that voice, always so soft against his skin in the mornings, at night, pressed so close together they could meld together as one creature entirely.

Will wonders if they haven't, truly, already.

His palm splays over the shadow of stubble against his jaw and he lifts it as his hand is dropped.

"It's why I think you inhuman, Hannibal," he tells him, genuine, for a change, quiet. "Your... inability... to consider alternate forms of coping with displeasure than to remove the objects causing it."

"Alternate forms, such as attempting to let us both escape before our path could be barricaded?" Hannibal asks, watching every gesture that Will allows himself, curling his fingers as he imagines the softness of Will's beard beneath his hands, as it had been only a day before. "Alternate forms, Will, like giving you an opportunity to be honest with me - a more difficult concept for you than I had anticipated - so that I could remedy your mistakes for you and avoid exactly this."

Hannibal rises, breaking the stand-off between them, and carries his food, mostly untouched, back to the counter to store it. Exposing his back to the man whose eyes he can feel on him where once there were hands, grasping and stretching eager against his skin to pull them so near that Hannibal was certain they would never be parted.

"We are villains in kind then," he observes softly. "Finally brought level. I meant to kill you, since one of us must be honest now in our intentions. I have never felt a pain so consuming as your betrayal, until I considered instead that you would be gone from my world entirely, were I to do so."

Pouring a glass of wine with a dire look towards the unscrupulous provenance of it, he turns back to face Will, arms folded across his chest. "I trusted your humanity and your heroism, Will, and you proved yourself a villain far before I left your fingerprints as proof of your wrongs. Perhaps now we may better know each other as we truly are, freed from the burdens of your moral righteousness."

Will watches with utter fascination the man he had once admired, then looked up to, then - Will swallows the word. Admires him the way he manipulates his words, his tone and body to bring the slithering tendrils of guilt up against Will’s throat.

He could applaud him the effort.

A talented creature indeed, that could push so hard to no guaranteed end. He considers the words, the way some sing out in a bright spark of genuineness while others taste of ash and monotony, like a speech memorized so often the deep themes within lose all meaning.

"Semantics,” he says at length. "You claim 'freed'. I think 'stolen'."

The words wound, though the pain shows in little more than a twitched furrowing of brow, than in a pale press of his lips together as he studies the scarlet wine.

"Should I have left you there, bleeding out alongside them? Or left you there to explain to the authorities who have always been so generous in their understanding of you."

He sets down the glass after taking the barest sip of it.

"No," he answers himself. "No, you wished for me to run. Why?"

Will considers this, remembers the cold terror he had not known to feel, but had done so on instinct, when he had seen the knife, considers how he had stood still, prepared to take it, to feel the blood and heat leave him despite his hindbrain screaming for him to move.

He could have lain there, bleeding, as they had.

Perhaps he should have.

"So I would be free of you," Will replies, and he can taste the lie like acid in his throat.

The blow is struck, the mark met, and Hannibal turns his head a little, a furtive motion as though to pull loose the fibers of his body that suddenly feel too tight, the seams pulling, the suit ill-fitted, suddenly, too small and unmeant for Hannibal to wear. And perhaps it is just that, perhaps there is little beneath his skin but the rot that others seem to see so readily.

He feels it, crawling there, the decay of every touch shared and the smothering of every breath born between them.

Appropriate, he considers, that Will would yet wield the blade that actually severs them.

It is only an instant that passes, in that tilt of his head, before Hannibal responds softly enough that he hopes it masks the insistence in his words. "A liar to the very end."

The wine is lifted again, swallowed whole, and tastes of ash on his tongue.

"I will not release you. What nature of monster would I be to show such mercy as that?"

"Embrace it," Will returns, words terse and heavy.

He feels ill. Uneasy. Smells blood once more when he had thought he had finally cleared his nose of it. But this is a new metal. This is his own.

Sixteen paces.

There had been twenty-eight to the room in which he had bathed.

Four from the bath to the window.

An endless metronome from the window to his peace of mind.

Will blinks. Before him rests the spoon he had been allowed with dinner, the empty plastic cup. The table is heavy but moveable, its center off by enough to shift it at the right angle, tilt and push and displace. It would bar the doorway, a minor inconvenience but precious seconds in that.

Will feels his heart hum softly just beneath his hearing, knows Hannibal speaks again only due to the modulation in the air, the rise and fall of syllables like cities, the smell of fire just the same from both. He does not raise his eyes.

He blinks.

And then the motions are too fast too register, a deafness to everything but his own breathing, his own heart just in time with it.

The table tilts.

A push.

Displacement.

And Will wins four seconds and thirty-two paces before the glass shatters and the sound returns to his hollow mind.

The tide pulls him sharp and sudden into the darkness.

There were no lights visible from the windows because there are no lights but that of the little cabin. Isolation, stark and black, the water a torrent against him from the lightning-sparked sky above. The sound of waves - no, trees - tossed by rough winds of the storm renewed, forests in all directions but for a car path made thick with mud that sucks against his feet.

Blood mingles with the cold rain, cuts that do not distract but in the warmth of their emission against Will's skin as he leaps the barrier of muck that would catch his heels, and finds solid ground on the other side.

Shaking hands press firm against the grass, steady and launch, a run as fast as trembling legs can carry. To the waves, to the trees, to hurtle himself into an oblivion still not as dark as the one that pursues him. He does not need to look to know that Hannibal is there, four seconds and thirty-two paces behind and gaining.

Thud-thud-thud of the table kicked aside, the door flung open.

Three seconds.

Thud-

-thud-

-thud dull in his chest.

Two seconds.

Thud-

-thud-

-thud against the ground behind him.

One.

Thud.

Earth fills his mouth and nose, water blinds him, his skin tears with glass digging deeper as Hannibal collides with him, his body breaking as though thrown against a rock in a savage roiling sea.

It's enough to send them both slipping and Will twists, like an eel on a hook and gets his feet against the rocks beneath the mud itself to push again, to get higher, get farther.

The earth should be soft here.

Another catch. Another twist.

Should not be muddy, in a pine forest.

Another.

Perhaps it's elms -

More.

And it's like the writhing of their bodies in pleasure, tangled in bed and no other sound but their gasps and their murmurs, their skin sliding together slick and warm -

Will sees past the stars burning bright behind his eyes the shimmer of a knife in a kitchen he once knew well, the pulse of blood black from one who was meant to be dead long ago, an arm cruel against his neck to snap him back from the ground and catch his jaw, pin his skull between brutal hands.

“Embrace it,” snarls the voice against Will’s ear, and he cannot tell if it’s his own shaking or Hannibal’s as the man’s muscles snap taut to let the motion follow through to his neck, his spine, to end what should have ended long before now.

The crack that draws a shout from Will is not his own neck, but the peal of thunder overhead, and it silences the final *thud* of his head against the ground.

Chapter 3

The storm passes. Stillness settles.

There will be no more, to send the rushing sea against the shore, to split structures and crash bodies against the stones.

The damage cannot be undone, but in the dense quiet, the clean-up can begin. Reconstruction. It will not be the same, no, Hannibal knows this and must remind himself of it, but they can rebuild from the wreckage, stronger than before, and on stabler ground than what gave way beneath.

Will's hair is soft beneath his fingers, brushed back gently from his face, cleaned of the rubble that was driven into it. Glass plucked and dirt washed away, his body washed in sleep as though he were -

No.

He is not that.

Hannibal stilled his hand, twice, more still perhaps over their time together, to ensure that he is not *that*.

For a moment, he can feel Will's breath against his cheek, sighed against the back of his neck as the man wound his way close against him, to press their bodies together in need to feel closeness that only the other could provide, that only they could understand.

Hannibal can feel the winter sun of Baltimore heated against his skin and he shakes the memory away quickly, and turns his sight instead to the wounds to study that they are healing. Forces the feeling of twined fingers to instead press them to the pulse steady and strong. Chokes down the knot in his throat that cuts his breath in half and stands from the edge of the bed to leave.

He is here.

He *is*.

And for now that is enough.

Awake.

The pain is enough to know he is but the rest isn't so easy.

Awake and in bed.

Better.

Will hesitates, breathing even still, as sleep had allowed it. No harsh wake up from a nightmare, no drowning in an endless black sea. Just breathing, just feeling warmth allowed to his body here where it had not been in the basement.

A hand up against his face gingerly finds a gauze pad and tape over his forehead, just to the left. Beneath, the skin is hot, he can feel it throbbing when he allows himself to concentrate. But that doesn't matter. What matters is he's in bed, he's clean, he's dry and dressed, but he isn't free.

There was no boat on the ocean this time. Not when he turned back to look. There was the light of an oncoming train, the rest abyss and blackness and heavy in his lungs. A rough shudder takes him and Will grits his teeth, draws up his legs and sits.

A quick glimpse of the room betrays nothing of its intentions, but he knows the door is locked, the windows insulated and latched, without needing to check.

There is water beside the bed, settled to room temperature.

A plastic cup.

His laugh sounds nothing like one when it strangles free from him and he reaches, shaking, to sip it slowly. It tastes of rain, of rivers, of blood and soil and Will closes his eyes against the pain of swallowing.

You wished for me to run.

There are cuts in his feet, sharp rocks and glass that he does not remember feeling - more curiously, does not feel now, freshly dressed in bandages, but there is no pain when he sets them to the floor.

I will not release you.

Will knows this numbness. Blindfolded senses from painkillers and sedatives, to make only the barest sense of the world around him, and in a moment of whimsy, he is glad for it. He doesn't need more than that to know the truth of his plight.

"You are awake."

The voice is everywhere and nowhere when Will's eyes close, fringed in the static of volume that even spoken so low presses too hard against his ears.

Hannibal lingers in the doorway to the bathroom, towel brisk against his hands, and does not move closer, watching wary from where he stands.

"Your resilience is a thing of beauty, but be glad I did not let you go into those woods. Exposure would have found you long before anyone did."

It's a promise, not a threat. Perhaps a suggestion that should Will try again it will be just as futile, just as ill advised.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

Will wonders if Robert Frost ever understood the depth of true darkness in a forest. The full weight of a road that winds its way within and then fades as the rest of reality does. Sound. Sight. Smell. Where gravity exists but doesn't matter. And death exists but doesn't hear you.

He opens his eyes, takes a long breath through his nose, sets the plastic glass aside.

"What kind company it would have been," Will replies, moving a few steps from the bed, away from the bathroom, before he leans against one of the walls and slides down into a sprawled crouch, hissing as he nearly turns an ankle.

His head spins, lack of food, lack of anything but drugs in his system, and pain, and regret, and the first inklings and tendrils of genuine fear. He will not die here, because Hannibal does not wish him dead.

"Why am I awake?" he asks, tone low, quiet, it barely matters, really, why. Rhetorical. But he refuses to allow his mind the silence it craves to think. It had been a blessing to have dreamless sleep, he wonders if he will have to knock himself unconscious to experience it again.

Hannibal watches, the shaking limbs and weakened frame, and does not move towards the man. The towel is folded three times over, held across both hands.

"Because I wished for you to be," Hannibal answers.

It is a simple enough answer, for a simple enough question. The only terms in which Hannibal can allow himself to consider this situation and the man who watches him narrow-eyed with spite from the floor.

"As you were asleep. As you are here. As you are yet alive."

He turns, tears his attention away from the coiled form that he would have drawn from the floor in an instant in another time, another life. There is damage, seemingly insurmountable, but it is for that reason that they must not it become a waste. The towel is hung again.

"Because I wish it to be so. And you do as well."

Rebuild.

Reconstruct.

Sturdier than before.

"I told you once that I would be your paddle, Will, and you have never known me to be false in what I say. Would that I might say the same, someday, but until then, I will not allow you to capsize, no matter how hard you attempt it."

The sound that issues from Will's mouth may once have been a laugh. It sounds tinny to his ears now, entirely false, and he ducks his head against his chest, closes his eyes again.

“Noise and clarity.” He sighs, swallowing and bringing a hand to his forehead to rub against the gauze before he peels it away, lets it drop to the floor.

“I would not accept your direction were I blind,” he tells Hannibal honestly, turns his eyes up, watches the man gather himself, shift, straighten and adjust. He gains nothing by angering him, but Will refuses to be anything but angry. Angry for Jack and Abigail and Alana. Angry for Beverly. Angry that he had allowed his own hand to be pulled, controlled, turned, to kill Randall.

And the anger seeps deeper still, beyond the skin and bones and sinew, because that kill had been entirely Will’s, had been a collection of experiences and needs, demands and desires, coiled and plaited and pulled taut around his neck until his only option was to follow the leash he himself grasped.

That had not been Hannibal’s work.

Will will be damned if he allows his nature to show through again.

“I will not accept your meals or the water. Your medicine or your words,” he promises him. “You may not let me capsize but I still have the hands to shoot myself in the head.”

So I would be free of you.

Hannibal's lip curls at the threat, smoothed only with a sweep of his tongue against his teeth as he turns back into the room.

"Then I will take those from you as well."

The floorboards creak beneath his weight, somehow greater, always, than the sum of his parts, two beings trapped inside one, with the speed and power and savagery of both. Hannibal lunges, whipcrack fast, and Will can hardly kick his feet out from beneath him in the stutter-stop of motion that blurs his vision. Harsh fingers jerk him by his hair, press beneath his jaw to keep him still, tight enough to throttle his breath to a hiss.

"I will exhaust you of your betrayals, Will," Hannibal promises in return, heart snapping rapid-fire in the way that only Will can bring out in him. The only one who has ever shaken Hannibal's patience and control so entirely.

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me."

The exhaustion that weighed the man at dinner - hours ago? days? - no longer burdens him, and he lifts Will from the floor to pin him to the wall. Where once their lips met ardent and fierce, they now curl over teeth bared in mutually assured destruction.

Better that, than to go it alone.

"Were you disgusted, then, in your deception? When I lay my hands against you, my body, my heart, all for you? Did your skin crawl as I kissed it, with horror behind your eyes? Tell me, Will, did you wonder if the filth would ever wash from your body after you lay in bed

beside me - did you soap the moans from your lips that you forced yourself to create to satisfy me?"

Will twists, vision darkening again, pops of color like sparks against his eyelids, around Hannibal where he stands, so close, and entirely unreachable. Can he not understand that Will wants nothing? That the only way nothing will come is if he lets it?

He feels the words seep against his skin, resists them before they warm him regardless, relax his muscles to how they had been then, part his lips as he once had, in pleasure. He had not lied then. He had found his only comfort in the man's arms, in his trust and warmth and protection. He had sought his only escape from the void against the heart that beat in time with his.

As it does now.

Will chokes and doesn't think of it.

Doesn't think of how the last time they were this close it was after dinner, the tension thrumming electric through Hannibal as he had whispered soft promises against Will's ear, promises that Will knew the other didn't believe.

The moment he was letting him go.

And then the knife never struck. Not him.

It severed, instead, an artery Will had thought he had burned closed.

He has no words for him. No more lies. No truths. He scrabbles his feet against the wall and grits his teeth, arching his neck just enough to gather enough saliva in his mouth to spit.

Instinctive.

Vindictive.

Empty and cold.

Hannibal blinks, once, and is gone.

Silence rings empty in the room, and Will is alone. Though hands hold him in place, tighten further still against the flow of blood through his vessels, though Will can see pupils blacking out chestnut warmth, Hannibal is gone, replaced by something with breath still and heart conquered into quietude.

His eyes close. Fingers wipe slow through the spit, and the words fall softly.

"I will not keep you alive because I wish it," Hannibal decides. "I will keep you alive because it is the cruelest fate that I can give you."

The floor pulls free of Will's feet as he is jerked away from the wall, enough movement to choke down air into scalded lungs, before he finds himself back in the bed. Hannibal drops a

leg across him, pins Will there beneath that inhuman density and crushes the breath from his lungs when he leans over him to snare straps from the corners of the headboard.

"You will eat. You will drink. If I have to intubate you to ensure it, I will do so."

He snarls as Will bucks, and ducks his head to watch the man beneath him.

"Keep the devil close, they say."

Will spits again, twists his wrist in the first cuff, manages just to turn to look at the second before his head feels like it's split, a white heat, a dizziness he can't control and then the stale taste of regurgitated water and Will doesn't feel much else.

The ocean is tilting.

Will can see it uneasy on the ceiling, harsh waves and heavy spray and stinking foam, tossed and thrown and ripping itself apart. He can feel the salt dry his throat and coughs and the ocean changes color.

Waves roll
out.

Waves roll
in.

Will jerks awake and coughs, hands tugging uselessly against the straps keeping him pinned, wrists raw now from trying to work himself loose.

He's too far from them to chew through them.

His arm is too thick to chew through that, though it gives him a sick satisfaction to think that he will not give Hannibal such a gift for dinner.

"Will you eat?"

The voice breaks, crashes against him cold enough to soak into his skin, chill him to his bones. The same questions, steady as the tide, every time he awakens enough to rattle his bindings against the bed.

"Will you drink?"

He wonders if the man ever leaves, or if he merely sits, waiting, for Will to surge gasping from the depths. They do not look towards each other, passing only at a distance, before Will sinks back into the bed, and beneath the waves again.

The tide goes, as quickly as it came.

And returns again.

Hands press, skin or gloves, too cold to tell the difference. The movement shifts Will, enough to raise him from his haze, to feel dampness against his body, as though some great cat were cleaning him with rough strokes of tongue.

"What -"

His own voice scrapes unfamiliar from his throat, as though something were stuck in it.

Something was stuck in it.

Slid past gaping lips with careful hands.

Will knows he is not hungry, knows why, and heaves at the thought of it.

Savage fingers catch his hair and jerk him forward so quickly that the bathroom is a sweep of color, turned to face downward into the water in which he lays bare.

"I will not have you choke on it if it comes up."

Will you eat?

He will.

He has.

Will is sick into the tub, and a sob vibrates through his body, shakes it like strings plucked. A palm flat against his back, patting as though he were a child with an upset stomach.

Will hates him, and Hannibal knows it.

After a bath Will returns to bed, to miraculously clean sheets, to the same old shackles that every night he fights. If he fights too hard, there is a bare sting against the crook of his elbow, the blissful cold of sedatives.

It's then that Will induces nightmares. Forces himself to remember every moment in that kitchen. Track every motion, relive everything again and again.

If he dreams enough he will scream.

If he screams, there's another sting on the needle, a numbness to his entire arm, blankness.

He hopes he'll scream loud enough, soon, for the needle to push deeper, further, more and more. For the blankness to last forever and keep him so comfortably sedated.

Or perhaps he will be trapped in nightmares forever. Cold sweat sticking him to the sheets, to his clothes, to his skin, slipping from his bones and to his blood and out his mouth and down his nose and -

Sometimes he wakes sobbing.

When he sobs he isn't sedated again.

The sounds, harsh enough that they are foreign to his own ears, ring into the empty room, floor to ceiling, and out the door left open in negligence.

No. The man does nothing negligently.

Let open as a taunt, freedom so close and entirely out of reach, and the chair beside it empty.

Will jerks against his restraints, to bring the pain back to his wrists instead of his chest, when his eyes rest on the chair longer than the door. They rattle enough that he hears footsteps stir, a sob wrenches itself from him, face turned against the pillow.

The footsteps cease, and Hannibal watches him. Will, painfully clever and utterly lovely, reducing before his eyes. Thinning, weakening, an atrophy of the body to match the atrophy of his soul. Bones press against stretched skin, ghastly pale over the weeks that he has been like this, and the supplies running too thin to maintain him as he is.

He does not allow the concern into his words, as he asks again, as always, "Will you eat? Will you drink?"

A pause, jaw tight, before he adds, "I will not sedate you again. Not until you understand, Will, not until you see the truth that I saw once in you, that you cannot see." A hissed sound through his teeth, sharp. "That was driven from you by the ones for whom you would now starve yourself."

Will you eat?

Will you drink?

Will says nothing, feeling the way tears slip hot down his face, down into his ears when he turns to face the ceiling, hot over his nose when he turns, finally, to watch Hannibal properly.

He wavers, like a shivering anti-shadow, as though Will is looking up from under the ocean, and for a moment he gasps again, confused, cold, shaking so hard he can barely breathe.

He's having a mild seizure.

Hannibal had lied to him then.

Hannibal had wanted to see what would happen.

Wind him up.

Watch him go.

“I can taste their skin when you feed me,” he says softly. “Taste their blood when you make me drink.” A small smile, shivering, flickering between attempted amusement and utter anguish and Will sobs.

“Like a holy communion.”

He turns his head again, swallowing thick. Hears Hannibal step nearer.

He doesn’t know how long he has been here, how many nights have passed to days how many seasons to others. He knows nothing beyond the soft seep of the ocean into his blood, and his blood in turn into the ocean.

The one above him rages red.

Hannibal knows in that moment that he still has a heart, for how violently it tries to rip itself from its moorings and offer itself to Will.

Eat of my flesh, Hannibal's body sings. Drink of my blood. Live again through me, and he presses fingers to his eyes to drive away the sight of Will arching softly beneath him.

Replaces it with Will coiling, aching, here instead, thin despite the feeding tube, the slow wasting away of muscles leaving his body as hollow and angry as he is inside it.

"Death sustaining life," Hannibal echoes, just enough away that he could not reach for Will if his body betrayed him to do so. "In that, then, I offer you forgiveness. Salvation, if you will partake, but it must be given and taken freely."

Light shimmers liquid from beside the bed and Will tilts his head to watch, beyond fear now, as Hannibal's convictions are laid bare. Beyond fear as the man adds oath to his words with blood, a hypodermic raised - glittering - against the light.

"Do you remember why man was sent from the Garden?"

Will's words choke dry, a rattling hiss of breath. "Satan's temptation."

A glance, almost amused if there were anything so human left in the man.

"It was a lie, Will. God asked for truth - the act itself forgiven, had they simply repented their sin. And for their deception, their paradise was struck from them. Cast into the harsh realities of the world, their flaws laid bare before each other."

He settle on the edge of the bed, and wipes a swipe of alcohol against Will's hip.

"Mankind has spent its existence attempting to earn its way back to that peace," Hannibal murmurs, sliding the needle beneath Will's skin, hushing him softly as it burns beneath his muscles. It is withdrawn, another swipe of gauze, and he stands.

"Perhaps for us, it will not take so long."

Will blinks, says nothing, just watches Hannibal. He is exhausted, dehydrated, drinking only when made to, and then with a struggle. He no longer knows if he is spiting the man or hurting himself and it hardly matters. As Hannibal is punishing Will with life, so Will is punishing Hannibal with his rejection of it.

A snake eating its tail.

Endless circle of skin and bone and blood and teeth.

"You would not have listened," Will says softly, "had I told you the truth."

He turns his head away deliberately when Hannibal takes up the glass to offer him the cool water within. He swallows.

He is used to the sedative weighing his blood down within moments, yet this is lighter, a humming effect to his limbs much like the vibrations of adrenaline, but not as evocative of a response. Will merely blinks, again, before the room around him pulses, a slow thing in time with his heart at first, then impossibly faster.

Until Will realizes it *is* his heart, thudding and burning against his ribs. He parts his lips to breathe, manages only a soft sound of surprise, displeasure, embarrassingly fear.

"They called themselves your friends, Will. Worked their way into your mind as all the killers you allowed inside, as I once did," he murmurs. "But because you trusted them, you let their vines wrap far deeper through you, and it blinded you to their intentions. To the harm into which they thrust you time and again."

Will blinks, watches as Hannibal stands as though suspended in a viscous liquid, and in another blink, he is across the room.

A room of metal, not of wood, or so it sounds in the echoing of his voice, harsh and cold as the words rebound and bounce back on themselves.

"And so I will prune them, unwrap them from where they have wound their way within you, and then we will know the truth of it." Hannibal pauses. "Of us."

Fingers press to Will's temples, the touch lingers long after Hannibal's hands have moved away, following the cords of the electrodes to the device that rests now on the table, that wasn't there before, he would have noticed he would have seen -

"Open."

Will's lips part in a question that finds no voice, and it is enough for Hannibal to slide the mouthpiece between his teeth. He tries to speak past it, a slur of words, and Hannibal looks away from the wetness that wells in blue eyes that once glistened that way for him in breathless affection.

"We will know the truth of it," the man repeats, or maybe does not, Will isn't sure his lips move or if he hears his own voice, if it's the echo of old words caught in this place, trapped, held here as they both are, now.

"Breathe."

The dial turns, and the room goes dark.

Something drips from the ceiling in a slow metronome of sound.

Drop.

E c h o.

Echo.

D
r
E c h o.
p
.
.
.

Color returns in a rush, all at once from black to blinding white and the pendulum creaks to life. Will walks forward, feet absorbing his footprints as he steps leaving not a trail behind. He will not turn around and turn to salt, he walks on, his eyes ahead.

The ocean is ahead.

Open maw and howling storm and yet Will feels warmth against his skin, like sparks of pleasure, gentle fingers, rough lips, a sigh, a click, a pendulum.

And trees, here, not the sea.

Elms perhaps.

Or pines.

And all the while suffocation, classical music pouring into Will's mouth and from his ears, drawing vines with them, a taste of iron, rough and coarse and hot and choking, tearing his lungs like a scream metallic.

Metal room, wooden room, echo drop e
c
h
o

Will sits in bed, cold sweat, hot breaths and mind on fire. Hands pressed to his eyes and moans bringing breath with them, not breaths tugging moans. He almost leans into the hand on his shoulder.

"Will you eat?"

It's morning. Sky blue and clear enough to suggest cold.

"You had a dream."

"What?"

"You screamed."

Will blinks.

Shutters falling, dark outside. Hannibal is by the door again and Will’s hands are tight in leather.

"I didn't." The roof echoes with rain and Will shakes his head.

"Will you drink?"

"I shouldn't -"

Drip.

Drop.

Echo -

"Stop!"

Breathe.

Hannibal promised, once, he would never again. No, never. Not that.

Not this.

He forces himself to watch Will's eyes roll back, not in pleasure but in pain, fingers curling in convulsions rather than climax, body bending beautiful even still, and he forces himself to watch every shudder, every gasp that gusts into his lungs when the pulses stop. He forces himself to watch and to know his own broken promise.

This.

His skin crawls, decay and rot seeping from beneath it, as though his body were not his own, indeed, as he has made Will's separate from his mind again.

No, never.

Hannibal will bring him back this time. He will not leave him to burn.

"Breathe."

It is minutes but it might have been days, he knows, rewinding time through electric pulses, forcing Will to reject his own synaptic fusions, erase, undo.

Rebuild. Reconstruct.

His hands are claws as he shuts off the machine, lets it hum to silence in harmony with the moan that pours from the man at his side. The guard is removed from his mouth, the straps loosened to fall from his wrists.

"Will," he says, as softly as he ever did before they were cast out, before he reached back to pull Will fighting through the Garden gates. "Will." Again, awakening him from sleep on a snowy morning in Baltimore, stroking the back of his fingers against Will's cheek as the electrodes are removed, pressing his palm against his clammy cheek to return warmth to it, tenderness.

"Will you eat? I will make you something," Hannibal asks, bowed low enough to brush a kiss across Will's sweat-soaked brow. A bad night's sleep, a nightmare, awoken sweating but to a familiar touch. The bed feels different here, different than he remembers, and he seeks for blankets to warm against the chill, the cold that must be the cause of his shaking.

Consciousness comes in pulses too.

Shaking breaths and worried sounds. Will turns into the hand against him, to the voice around him. A comfort, an anchor, a friend. Will retches, dry heaves with nothing for his stomach to bring up and sits, as far as Hannibal's palm against his forehead allows it, as much as he can without dizziness eating him alive.

Soothing tones and gentle kisses and Will wonders why.

It has been so long since he'd woken in a cold sweat with Hannibal, the man's warmth enough to lull him into rest, enough to keep the nightmares at bay. He feels sick, now, entirely empty, shaking so hard his teeth tremble before he leans his weight against Hannibal and swallows air.

Will you eat?

A frown, sitting more familiar on his face than the smile Hannibal warrants.

Will you drink?

Will licks his lips and tries, tries so hard to remember, to understand.

you
Will eat.

You

Will eat.

You will.

Eat.

eat
Br he, Will.

"No," he sighs, closes his eyes. Swallows.

"You will."

The sea is calm again, no push and pull, forcing itself against him, tugging him back towards its depths. Will presses his hands to his eyes and sees grey, feels weight bear against his shoulders as Hannibal allows him to lean. A hand on his shoulder, rubbing out the tension in the muscles there that daily weaken, hand on his back, rubbing in slow lines to feel the breath fill his lungs.

Will presses harder, leans into his hands, to drive the waves behind his eyes again, to bring movement back to the slow sludge that sits motionless. He needs the ebb, he knows he has to remember, to let it move him and let his pendulum swing, to recall where and how, here, when, how long.

There is nothing.

Fingers curl into his skin, his own, pressed against his face.

There is nothing but this.

But them.

There was but

but

"No."

Nothing. His mind is still and he is awake but he must be asleep, still.

Still.

Hannibal watches as the man against him slides his face into his hands, elbows against his knees, forward, and slumps to curl on his side. He does not remove his hand from Will's back, guiding him, as he has before, as he does now, as he will until they find their way to paradise again.

The sound that wrenches from Will is an agony that nearly sunders Hannibal whole. He knows he seeks, through the memories now blurred from his mind, made pale and faded, he seeks and he does not find and another sound curls from his lips against the mattress, childlike and small.

Swallowing harshly, Hannibal averts his eyes, allows the heat to build in them and bubbled over, left to cool against his cheeks. Not this, he swore to himself, not this to the man whose mind had held him in rapture, entranced him so entirely that he gave up everything to simply be near it, tampered with, muted, stolen -

not this

not again

breathe

- no, it is impermanent, it is temporary, a means to an end, Hannibal tells himself, as every sound stops his breath and every movement jogs his heart. Will would not let his mind move the way it must, to remember, to know the truth of them, and so Hannibal must rewind it for him.

Will doesn’t know why his nose is bleeding. Nothing hurts.

Nothing.

It is a strange and harrowing sensation, like floating but heavier. He lifts his hand and drops it, presses it to his face and lets his eyes close as he feels the numbness leave him.

One.

Two.

Three.

F
o
u
r

"Will you eat, Will?"

His voice is soft, and echoes, and Will blinks before he can focus on Hannibal properly. He's smiling, warm, still barely awake on a Sunday and comfortable enough not to move for a long, good while. Will smiles back, tilts his head. Tastes the blood against his lips and frowns.

"No," he says, gentle, he's not hungry, but it seems to upset Hannibal more than it ever once did. Will's eyelids flicker. Daytime. Night. Back again.

"No thank you," he amends.

He draws a hand through Will's hair, strokes the curls back from his face and runs his palm softly down his cheek. A subtle swipe of thumb across his lip wipes most of the blood away, slowed now to a trickle.

Will threatens him with another little smile, and Hannibal looks away from the drawn cheeks, pallid skin, blood dark against his mouth and circles black beneath his eyes.

Away from what he has done.

Away from the desolation that lays before him, smiling softly in confusion

Away from eyes that accuse even as his mind hums clear and his hands curl into the blankets laid over him.

"You must," Hannibal intones.

There has been no more sedation or straps, no need for it in the hours of pliancy that follow the therapy, no need for it in the blind resistance that builds again in the hours that follow those, body too weakened to do little more than skulk towards the bathroom or give voice to hisses of spite.

And through it all, Hannibal seeks for him, whispers reminders against his ears with words and against his heart with touch, to stir in him what once must have, surely, must have surely been there.

Hadn't it?

"Please."

Surely.

"Will."

It must have.

"I miss you."

"Will you eat?"

Will settles his arms above his head and draws his brows together. The words ring so deep within him, too deep for something so meaningless and common.

"If I must," he offers, sliding his eyes to Hannibal and smiling gently when the other swallows, nods.

"You must."

"Alright."

Will manages to make his way to the kitchen, arms supporting him against the shabby counter as he stares out the window at the slowly looming dusk. It is so quiet here. Isolated. Unfamiliar.

Sixteen paces.

Will blinks, turns. He keeps his eyes on the basement door while Hannibal cooks. Says nothing. Feels his heart tug a beat out of rhythm.

Daytime.

Night.

Rinse, repeat, wave, retreat.

"How long have we been here?"

The question makes Hannibal pause, spatula poised above the skillet. The word rings in his ears, we, and he bites his tongue to stop from asking Will to repeat himself, simply so he can hear it again.

“Long enough,” he replies. Will is close enough to touch, leaning just there, still a little unsteady, and Hannibal forces his eyes back to the eggs that simmer against the pan.

Protein scramble.

God forbid we become friendly.

He cannot ask Will what he remembers, though the curiosity pulls at him like fishhooks in his skin. Does he remember the treatments, the sedation, the woods, the cellar? Further back still, to the house they once shared, in truth, for the amount of time spent there together, and the blood left in their wake?

Rebuilding his own memories, perhaps, to fill in the spaces that Hannibal hopes - bitterly hopes - exist as void between the last time Will stood beside him while he cooked, leaning just there.

Close enough to touch.

Will hums.

"I wonder if Alana took the dogs,” he muses, soft, eyes still forward, not looking at Hannibal, not looking at the food. "I left her a note that should I leave she should take them."

Twenty eight paces to the window.

Will listens to the tide of the forest, a hissing hum of pines and elms and shrubs between, the whisper of the creatures that live there, the silence of the people who do not.

"I wonder if she can walk,” he adds softly, voice just cracking on the word before he presses his lips together and swallows, ducking his head. He says nothing else for a long time, looking up only to tell Hannibal he's burning the eggs, asking for an aspirin for his headache after they eat.

They don't talk through their meal, and although Hannibal barely eats, Will cleans his plate.

Chapter 4

Will eats.

Slowly, days and weeks in, he regains the shape he had been in before Hannibal had taken him away. Richer food, designed for weight gain, for nourishment, comfort and warmth.

Will sleeps. More and more without waking in a cold sweat and terror.

Will stops talking for a while.

He'll stay calm, sit still, watch the sky outside pass from dusk to dark to dawn to dusk and he will say nothing. Hannibal speaks. Murmurs soft words to remind him of what they shared, of what they were, of what they could be. Hannibal speaks and Will keeps his head turned away and he can only hope he's listening.

Some days Hannibal can't bring himself to watch Will bend so painfully off the bed, sobbing and whimpering as his mind is electrocuted and reordered. Other days he does it just to hear Will make a sound.

Its dark, too far from dawn and too cold to be evening anymore, and Hannibal feels cool fingers against his face where he lies, his own bed a cot where Will gets a mattress.

"We should have gone," Will whispers softly, brushing fingertips over Hannibal's cheekbones, his lips, before taking his hand away and turning his head, a barely-darker profile in the lightless house, in a lightless, waterless ocean.

"Together. I should have gone with you."

Hannibal closes his eyes again, no sooner than they had opened.

A ghost, that torments him nightly. Appears above him, at his side, wry smiles and gentle teases, bright eyes and warm hands, and ensures that he is not without suffering for the deeds he's done.

More real, though, as he feels fingers move against his mouth, than this spectre ever normally seems. Hannibal stretches, to lay his arm across the sprawling bed, to feel that phantom nearer him in the palace of his mind. If it will come, then he will have its false comforts.

He learned many weeks ago that he is unable to exorcise it from this space.

But his arm falls to the floor, fingers brushing the cold wood. There are no soft sheets here, no plush mattress, but merely the metal bar of the cot digging into his arm and a sigh against his cheek.

His eyes open again.

"Will."

“That night,” Will continues, voice still soft, setting a hand against the metal frame and leaning closer over Hannibal, though his eyes remain averted for now.

“Neither of us should have been there still. We should both have been gone.”

Harsh whispers, gentle words, and the desperation behind them driving Will’s throat to click as he swallows, his breathing to come shaking from his lips before he licks them.

“I thought I was doing well, for Jack, for Alana, for everyone. I thought I could undo everything bad with a single good thought. Tell you in advance, have you leave, have you listen to me to.” He’s speaking so quickly now, a torrent of words like waves themselves, washing up against the corners of Hannibal’s mind. Not his phantom. *Not this.*

“I should have called it off, called it away, I should have told you so we could have, we could -”

The torrent stops and Will stills, breathless and shivering before he takes a slow breath, measuring, and parts his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I should have known you would not go without me. I should have known. Because I had come there to make sure you were gone so I could follow.”

Breathe.

Will's profile is shadow against shadow, close enough that the details can be made out, fuller now, healthier than in months before, but the dire darkness in his words is blacker still than even the lightless room in which they lay.

Hannibal forces a slow breath to fill his chest.

The wave washes in.

He will not call Will a liar now, though at any time before he might have. Not for this - *fool me once...* - not for the words he has driven them both to madness to hear.

Will's hair is soft between Hannibal's fingers, grown into long looping curls that twine beneath his touch. He turns a lock of it and gently tucks it behind Will's ear.

The tide rolls out far faster than it came in.

"You lied to me," whispers Hannibal, the pain of his words transparent here in the dark, where there is no light to illuminate the core of decay that yet shifts squirming under his skin. "I would have forgiven you."

A sigh, shorter, harsher than Hannibal intends it to be, as his thumb strokes against Will's temple where too many times his only contact has been to press electrodes.

"I have," he breathes. "I have forgiven you time and again, and you lie and you fight and you run and you starve."

So I would be free of you.

Hannibal's hand drops when the warmth does not come to it.

A shadow.

A ghost.

He can see Will's brow furrow, watches as he turns so his profile is gone, just an outline, now, a false idol. Yet Hannibal wants nothing more than to bring him around, bring him back, feel him come alive again for him.

For himself.

For them both.

Please.

"And I cry and I ache because you won't let me die," he says gently, "because you have forgiven the lies, washed me, fed me, clothed me and you keep forgiving them."

Will finally turns his head enough to cast a light against it, half in shadow, like a chalk sketch on the road after it rains, and his eyes, so blue they almost glow, the way the light falls, almost fluid, liquid, water themselves that pull the tides and do not yield to them.

Will.

"You have never once forsaken me and I repaid you in hate," he breathes. "Because nothing else exists within me to give you anymore. Nothing but hate for my lies, my fleeing my fear. My mistrust and my cruelties. Nothing but hate for myself that I cannot change to anything more. And I hate myself for that too."

I miss you.

Raising onto elbows, Hannibal sits slowly, a long unwinding of a back overworked and laid against a bare cot, of shoulders on which the burden of weight now aches enough to draw a sound from him.

"Then hate yourself," Hannibal allows softly. "But know that I do not, and in the worst moments between us, I never have."

Close enough to touch, near enough that Hannibal can feel the tremors of Will's body or his own or both, quaking as they cling to this.

To each other.

Fingers intertwined, clumsy, and finally winding tight to squeeze, shaking, one against the other.

Their solitary stone, to stand against when seas are savage.

"Will you hear me, Will?" he asks, focused on their hands, the strange sensation of palms pressed and bony fingers wrapped tight together. "If there were little more than hate and fear to you, I would not have fought so hard to bring you back home again. Will you let me?"

Rebuild.

Reconstruct.

Will you?

The words are soft but they hum through Will's blood, throb in his head, and it's all he can do to time his answer to his heartbeat without saying it.

Never once betrayed by him.

Return from a burning mind with diligent care and time, nothing but the truth since that trial by fire, nothing but honesty and trust and closeness that Will craves, that crawls against his skin and itches and scabs and flakes away to nothing leaving Will to seep and bleed alone.

Jack had condemned him.

Alana had doubted him.

Abigail had rejected him.

And Hannibal Lecter had held him close through feverish nights and cold sweats of nightmares and whispered his name and *brought him back*.

The kiss is soft when it comes, almost unpracticed, again, between them, almost forgotten, but Will whimpers as he had the first time, closes his eyes and parts his lips as Hannibal had once so sought to relish. Had missed.

Had ached and itched and hurt for.

Two fractals, doomed to repeat their pattern, no matter what the change and what the cost.

And slowly, so slowly, this storm passes.

Hannibal's fingers work through Will's hair again, a breeze to ruffle his curls and draw them back from his face, that Hannibal can see him so near - close enough that now they touch - can feel the softness return to Will's body without the use of drugs or electricity, with only shuddering breaths and warm lips that meet slowly, time and again.

Again and again.

He breathes.

"I have only ever wanted what is best for you," Hannibal whispers, and the words echo in Will's mind, he's heard them before, over spans of weeks or maybe months. Another whimper, quiet, and Hannibal surrounds the man in his arms to draw him into his lap.

Clumsy, fumbling as though they had not done this a hundred times, as though they had not thought of a thousand more than that, seeking fingers across cheeks and shoulders, kisses searching over mouths and jaws, bared necks and strands of hair.

The cot is scarcely room for the man himself, but Hannibal lays back slowly. He brings Will atop him, to lay heavy and plaint over him, and parts their kiss with a gasp. Eyes widen in the dark to take in as much of the other as they can, foreheads pressed together, and hearts falling into time with one another.

"Stay," Hannibal insists softly. "Do not go again."

To the river, to the sea. To the woods that beckon dark, to fates that await blacker still.

"I will not let you," he swears.

The months fray, like endless strands of silk, tear apart and pull and twist until they hang on the breeze and whisper with it.

Will kisses him again, hands up to trace the familiar curves of bones in his face, the smooth skin, the light, straight hair. Feels the warmth of Baltimore in summer, laying over his back in stripes from the window where the curtain has peeled away enough to let the light in. Feels the warmth between them, the heavy breaths and energy that hums with every touch of skin.

They don't fit anymore.

New angles and corners, exhaustion and pale skin. They need to work at adjusting, at turning and twisting, at allowing the other to discover what within them is sacred, is silent, is just for them to see.

"I will not go," Will promises, soft words that lay between them and bind, heavy, deliberate, now a desperation as much as a desire.

The shudder in Hannibal’s sigh loosens his body as it passes through, eyes closing to simply feel Will - the way his nose brushes Hannibal’s as they kiss, the softness of Will’s lower lip caught gently between his own, the heat of breath and of unfolding, together.

Endless as the movement of waves that must always meet the shore, joined as the moon and the tide that pull towards each other even from so far apart.

He will not take Will back to that bed, though the cot shifts precarious and hard beneath them, not to that place of the most dire need Hannibal has ever felt, casting out blindly to find the man who was once his.

Is now, again.

No, they will stay in this place where Will has sought and found him, far from where Hannibal sought Will for so many months. He slips his fingers beneath Will’s shirt, to feel the curve of his stomach, beneath the waistband of his pants to grasp the sharp bend of his hips, another kiss that lasts until their lungs pull them apart.

“You will come with me,” whispers Hannibal. “We will go together this time.”

"Yes.”

Eyes barely open and lips just as warm against Hannibal’s cheek as his lips, as lower still to his neck and collarbone. A desperate memorizing, as though it will be as fleeting as a blink, as light as breath.

Will pulls back, enough for Hannibal to follow, to sit up, legs on either side of the cot to balance them both as his hand finds the warm curve at the base of Will's back and Will bends it further still.

Outside, the ocean of the forest roars and rears to life.

White noise and clarity.

Hot breaths and closeness.

"I heard you," Will murmurs, "through the fire, through the the smoke. Your voice was a constant," another kiss, gentle, deep, "an anchor."

Will presses closer, wrapping his arms over Hannibal’s shoulders, down his back.

"I found you."

It is all Hannibal has wanted. Consumed him in body and mind, in guilt and in need.

The path behind them, split and joined too many times, matters as little as the path ahead, in whatever form it takes, now that they have found each other on it again. Whatever it took, Hannibal sighs and presses his fingers along the ridges of Will’s ribs, beneath the shirt that hangs too loose from his shoulders, whatever it took was enough to bring them here, together.

Again and again.

Before his hands can stray higher to capture the warmth and pulse of Will beneath cool fingertips, they lower suddenly to his thighs, wrap around to secure beneath him, and in a steady movement Hannibal stands, holding Will still pressed against him.

The cot creaks its gratitude as they rise and the floorboards its echo through the darkened house, not to the bed, no, but to the couch instead, room enough to lay together and turn, to face each other as they settle and feel the length of their bodies meet.

Will shifts, determined to get closer, determined to understand, to feel, to experience everything.

Sunny.

Snowing.

Fall.

Peach flowers.

Seasons upon seasons upon time upon time. Fractures and fractals and shivering cracks in his mind.

Things he remembered, things he knows are true, things he cannot fathom being false and yet -

Blood and wine and red

red
red

Drop
echo
drop

Thud
Thud
Thud

"Is it summer?" he asks, soft, nuzzling closer and bending until Hannibal's hands curve over his shoulders, back down under his shirt that Will works free and tosses to the floor.

"Will the sun fall through dust motes and silence in the morning?"

Hannibal hums at the question, lets the image play behind his eyes as he ducks his head against Will's neck to wrap his lips against the rediscovered place that makes Will's breath hitch so sweetly.

They have found their places here, on the couch where they know to seek the other when the tidal pull between them becomes too strong to resist, and their bodies begin to fit together again.

"Very nearly," Hannibal answers, watching as Will fidgets to his back and curls his fingers against the arm of the couch. His attention does not waver - as it never has - from the man before him, and he tastes a wandering trail down Will's pale chest. His lips catch against a nipple, and his hands lift to meet the raising bend of his belly beneath them, eyes fluttering closed with a sigh.

"It will heat our bodies and warm the air against our skin," he promises, "though we do an admirable job of it these days, ourselves."

How long have we been here?

"...it's been long enough," Will smiles faintly, reaching low to tug off Hannibal's shirt above his head, a sigh at the sight of him, stretched longer by the feel of the man's tongue against the thin trail of hair rising up his stomach.

His body remembers even when his mind seeks out for help. Instinct. Something so innate it doesn't need the mind to direct, it just does.

Hips lift as his pants are slid from them, still so loose, and Will lies bare before one of the only people he has ever allowed to see him this way, the only person he enjoys this with.

He thinks of spring.

He thinks of spring in Wolf Trap, with the light rains and the smell of packed dust that it wets. He thinks how there, too, the forest had sounded like the sea, but never as loud or as close as the one they float in the middle of, now. He thinks of early flowers and late frost. Thinks of how he had loosed sweet sighs and whispered pleas against the pillow, with Hannibal curled on top of him, soothing words against his skin.

He shivers, and outside, the forest sighs for him.

"Will."

A curl of air across his stomach, a breeze rather than a gale.

Hannibal slides to his knees, bowed as though in worship to the man who reclines before him. A rough touch now gentled, as they both are in these moments, pressed against his hips, the lean thighs that once were so wide and strong. Hannibal kisses them anyway, and remembers how Will used to cover his face and laugh when he sucked just there against the inside of his thigh.

The leaves shudder, and Will sighs.

He presses his nose, his mouth, in a slow nuzzle against Will's legs, rising with steady kisses to his length that rises, too, against his lips. Soft skin firming flushed against his tongue, his pulse steady still but lifting, a persistent beat that Hannibal measures with his lips.

Sweat and semen, heat and life, held within his mouth and sucked slowly to hardness.

"I gave you a gift, Will."

The kitchen had smelled of thyme and water, beneath it all the cloying sweetness of blood, and Will had wondered, truly, if he had simply interrupted a meal in preparation, that Hannibal would be at the counter shucking scallops, behind him the oven stacked with steaming pots and hissing pans.

For a moment, Will had desperately hoped.

That he would be able to pull the man into his arms, nuzzle between his shoulders and whisper to him that they need to go.

And that he would listen.

But he had found him panting, bloodied, hair disheveled as though by Will himself in his passion, lips parted on strong breaths, deep, heavy.

"You did not want it."

Will's thighs tremble, as they always do when Hannibal swallows around him, his voice wrings free in a hybrid of cry and groan. He presses his hand soft against his eyes and laughs.

"Slow," he begs.

The way he laughed when they first shared breakfast together.

The way he laughed over so many meals after, with drinks between them.

The way he laughed when sweat-damp and satisfied, he pulled Hannibal close against him.

That laugh has only ever been for Hannibal, and his heart could stop with the sound of it.

And so he slows, to draw out every twitch and pulse in his mouth, beneath his fingers, as Will’s cock stirs for him. He presses his palm up against his belly, to feel the muscles move as his hips turn into the sensation, seek out rather than simply succumb.

The velvety soft skin slips back and Hannibal watches, as he strokes his tongue around, beneath, across the head, to see the flush fill Will’s cheeks as well, eager and bright.

There is no hell that Hannibal would not drag himself through to ensure that color remains so vivid.

Slow.

Slow.

Slow.

Like warm wine in summer, like cuddling sleepy and exhausted in bed with just the barest sheet to cover them, sticking to the sweat of their limbs.

Will's breath hitches, his neck pulls taut and his pulse thuds free against it, warm and real and alive.

Kept alive.

"I haven't played truant since high school."

"I, never."

"I truly doubt you were saintly at school."

"Perhaps. But never truant."

A week in winter, bisecting spring, both away with stupid excuses and furrowed brows at their workmates. Unwell. Upset. Exhausted. Not in for the week I'm sorry, email me.

Fingertips and slick lips and hot breath and parted teeth, and always together, always touching and feeling the other respond to them. Always together, then.

As now.

Will's eyes turn downward from beneath his hand, and a grin parts his lips but the rocking movement of his hips doesn't lessen. Hannibal tightens his lips, tugs a little harder back along the length of him, lets his cock slip past spit-slick lips with a pop and fall back against his tensed belly.

Blue and wide, the focus of Hannibal's entire attention. The sky between dark branches that shudder like torches, flickering crimson leaves in flames that lick the bright beyond. The water spread glittering before them, peace and promise in every curl of waves against the riverbank.

The man who watches him now, as Hannibal draws up alongside him to tug Will's leg over his hip, who watched him then on the bank of the Potomac. Cheeks flushed scarlet in the autumn chill, scarf tucked beneath his chin, discussing a case, a lesson, a fishing trip with wide arms that wrap around him thin and reedy, and press long fingers through his hair.

Every word and every breath drew Hannibal's attention on those walks, long enough for the streetlights to brighten. Long enough to watch them brighten sooner, and the sun darken faster.

Blue and wide, as Will kisses him with a gentle sound that Hannibal cannot help but pull against him, rocking hip against hip, parting only to gasp breathless against his neck, and recall how soft the scarf felt against his fingers when amongst the falling leaves, Hannibal leaned low to kiss him.

Cool fingers, now, not as cold as those that woke him, now warmed by lips and skin and blood flowing fast beneath skin, cool and clever working the catch on Hannibal's pants.

Cool fingers that run through Hannibal's hair and part it, that press to just the right points on his scalp to send his entire body liquid, his voice free on low soft groans of pleasure. Fingers that know him well to comfort and restrain, to coax and silence, fingers that part his lips now to stroke the hot velvet of his tongue and paint his lips slick.

Will had given him lures, rare ones, beautiful things, for no other reason than because Hannibal had wanted them, had shown an interest, had asked. Delicate feathers and string, wire soft enough to bend by hand. Beads, of all colors.

Meditative, entirely, for Will, to make them. Something for Hannibal to hold on to and remember. Think of those clever fingers pulling the lures together, think of them adjusting and bending and tilting and touching, so practiced now to no longer puncture skin with the sharp, impossibly thin hooks.

Summer Will had been in prison.

Hannibal had waited.

"Slow?" he asks, and his lips graze Will's when he speaks. Both are bared, no blankets or clothing to shield their bodies from each other. No masks to hide their faces.

No lies to hide their truths.

Will nods, releasing his lip from between his teeth only to meet Hannibal in a kiss, fingers splayed against his face as the older man draws him tightly into his arms. He hardly lets him move for the strength of it, hums soft against his cheek and keeps Will against him, a sweet confinement, one that Will relishes when his fingers wrap through the hair on Hannibal's chest and breathes in little hitches and sounds against his neck.

Not lost anymore.

He twists a hand through the back of Will's curls and turns him onto his back. Will blinks, and settles against the pillow, the familiar mattress and worn sheets under his bare skin, warm enough now to need very little beyond the sheet that clings to both their hips.

He sighs, careful to keep still, careful to keep talking - meaningless things to fill the space they occupy so Will does not feel so alone, so vulnerable. And Hannibal lets him, answers his questions, holds gentle conversation as he kisses his way over Will’s shoulders, down his back, gently presses in one finger then another, hushing Will softly, reassurance, distraction.

Will had been nervous the first time, entirely aware of his inexperience here, entirely aware of his previous preferences finding nothing in common with what he has here, now, with Hannibal.

And here, now, he arches only gently, rediscovers the way Hannibal feels against him, heavy and warm, just as needy for Will, just as hungry.

I miss you.

Every day.

In words, in sighs, in gentle touches and soothing whispers.

Every day he called Will back from the depths of his mind. Anchored. Sustained. Kept him here and waited.

Will's fingers fold against his chest, up against is hair, foreheads together and eyes down, lips parted and smiling as another rhythm starts between them, familiar but new, now, with subtle undertones like the stroking of a theremin, humming, electric, somehow a harmony from noise and air.

“Stay,” Hannibal whispers, the word surrounded by the reassurance of kisses drawn out long between them. Each breath, caught between lips, held and cherished after the fear that yet lingers that perhaps there would be no more.

It is beyond imagining, now, that Hannibal might have thought to live without him, their patterns and rhythms inextricably tied.

Moon and tides, sea and shore, each unbound without the other to define them.

An ebb and flow of bodies, serene, lips tracing against the other's mouth when Hannibal presses slowly deeper, withdrawing to watch, blue eyes meeting black, the sea and the night sky, when he draws back out. He keeps Will pressed against him, broad hands against his back, is kept in turn by the clever fingers that tug against his hair to bend him back so Will can tuck against the curve of his neck with a whimper.

I found you.

The resurgence of spring, as when Will had first found himself beneath the man, held just as near as now. They had shared breakfast together, first, and Will had laughed, a sound that echoed the blossoms bursting to life after a winter that for Hannibal had lasted a lifetime. He hadn't known what it would take to break apart the ice and let the floes pass sharp through his veins until he heard that sound, saw the warm sunlight that filled the sky of Will's eyes, and felt with a sensation like something cracking inside his chest that the winter had finally ended.

Will laughs, and Hannibal sighs in the sweet agony of the most beautiful sound he has ever known.

Spring returned, after too long a winter apart.

Guiding Will's hips, slowing his urgency, Hannibal turns to his back and feels the bed fall away beneath them. The kitchen counter is warm beneath Will, heated by the summer sun, and he arches back against the support of Hannibal's hands and closes his eyes against the sun that illuminates him, winter-paled skin darkening to a golden tan from their long walks through the woods and fields.

That place was made for all of us.

"Beautiful," Hannibal praises, letting his lips come to rest above Will's heart beating fast and strong beneath his mouth. He rocks deeper, skims a hand along the curve of Will's thigh wrapped tight around his hip.

Will parts his lips and just tastes.

Sweat and arousal and need, sweet desperation and longing, all mingled against the undertone of Hannibal's heart, beating faster for the only person who could speed it.

Deeper and deeper and slow, enough to bring their voices mingling, their smiles mirroring. The Will on the counter at a blink the one above him now, hair long and wild and clean, eyes wider and darker than they had ever been in his anger.

He loves him, and Hannibal knows it.

Though it is Hannibal who pushes to meet the rise and fall of Will's body against his own, a feeling not so new again, to push and pull of needy heat around him, Hannibal wonders for a moment who has laid the greater claim to who.

Will reaches to pin Hannibal's hands above his head, kissing fiercely hard, so much so that it nearly hurts to be held beneath his weight.

Both rebuilt to better suit the other, lives altered irreparably in mistaken declarations and actions that in their intent, said only what they've always known to be true. But it was Will who told him to run, Will who wished to rid himself of Hannibal, and Hannibal who could not bear the thought of unbelonging...

"Stay," Will breathes, watching as Hannibal's eyes focus back on him, as his lips part on a gasp when Will turns his hips and accepts Hannibal inside his body, his mind, his heart, to fill him until both are only one.

"I will," promises Hannibal, before his oath is sealed with the taste of Will's tongue against his own.

Spring to winter again and they can taste snowflakes on their tongues. Hannibal kisses Will softly and the other makes a sound, keeps his eyes open, hands tightly fisted and held resolutely at his sides. Genuinely nervous, genuinely pleased, heart hammering bright and alive against the pulse in his neck that Hannibal had pressed gloved fingers to.

Will had initiated the next.

And the next.

Then it didn't matter who because it was like breathing, that slow brush of lips and gentle nuzzles, the shared air and closeness.

Will curls his hand over Hannibal’s arm and holds on, softer now, one released to move at leisure if Hannibal so chose, grounds himself, reminds. Adjusts his body to arch and bend and then goes still, indrawn breath and silence, a click in his throat and another sweet, nervous noise of pleasure.

"*Oh.*"

"Again," Hannibal breathes, watching Will's fingers curl against the sheets, knuckles whitening with every thrust.

Another sweet sound crests from Will's sigh, and though the summer has passed and the air drives them together at night to escape the chill, the space - the lack of it - between their bodies is hot enough to warm them both.

Hannibal catches Will's dark hair, longer and lovelier than he has ever seen it before, and tugs enough to bow his body into a graceful curve and raise his hips higher to meet the insistent push of Hannibal's own.

There are less questions now, less moments of lost time and stormy grey thoughts that trouble the man whose shoulder Hannibal kisses, bites, sucks against until it darkens beneath his mouth. Time has begun to move forward again, gaps left bare where lightning struck but they matter less, as the seasons change for them. Less to Will, who now only rarely seeks them out

with the distant look that betrays the undulations of his mind. Less to Hannibal, who summoned the storm that caused them.

Better this, to press forward and feel Will's body resist against his own, accept Hannibal's desires in knowing that they satisfy Will's desires just as readily. Better to rebuild.

Reconstruct.

The ground is much stabler than before.

Will presses down, bucks up, twists, gasps, bites his lips and shivers. So close now and no longer fighting to hold that back. So close now because both have driven the other to this, together.

When he cums it is with a sigh, a gentle groan alongside, and he trembles in Hannibal's arms, in his hold, possessive and wanted and protected and *his*.

Hips keep moving, slower undulations but tighter muscles, pulling groans from Hannibal before Will wins his release. Pooling heat, familiar, grounding, and Will ducks his head to kiss Hannibal's throat, suck a mark there for good measure.

I will not release you.

Will's arms loop around Hannibal's neck, hands holding his own elbows to secure them near, to ensure that Hannibal cannot move too far from him now.

He does not.

He could not.

Without withdrawing from him, to let that perfect belonging last even moments more, Hannibal allows Will to tug him nearer, laying heavy over him and seeking out a kiss. Will grins, averts his mouth to force Hannibal to chase it.

He does.

This world was made for them, this Eden of elms in which they find themselves, because no others exist within it. It is imperfect, with the cold winds that on some nights shake the windows in their old frames, the chill that leaks through the floorboards and wells around their ankles. But it is theirs, and so is made perfect by their solitary presence in it.

Hannibal hangs blankets by the windows to stop the drafts.

Scoops Will from the floor in a rough hug from behind when the floor doesn't please him.

And now, acquiescing in this, as Will rolls Hannibal to his back to sit astride him, sweat cooling against their bodies, and runs his fingers along the curves of the man's face.

Before intimacy, Will had run his eyes there, memorized the way the shadows fell, in the office when they sat, had their 'conversations', when he had stood and paced it, leaned on

Hannibal’s desk, turned his head to see him then.

At every angle he had learned him, at every angle Will had forced his pendulum to still.

He had wanted to trust. Had wanted to fall. Had wanted to be allowed, for a change, to evolve, adapt, and become something else entirely. Something that did not seek demons and did not see them at every turn, someone who could allow himself, for once, to be protected so he would not have to do the protecting.

Now Hannibal lies pliant beneath him, expression soft and heart slowing, and Will can feel the exhaustion in him, can feel the way his entire body had been wound so tight he was close to snapping.

Losing faith.

Giving up.

Changing his mind.

So he settles against his side and lets his eyes slip closed, not in sleep but in contentment.

“Are we near a stream?” he asks softly. “I’ve never been outside.”

Hannibal's eyes close, breath stilled for as long as it takes him to suppress the sigh of unfurling relief that threatens to spin him undone entirely. When the breath comes it is slow, spiraling out with the loosening of his body as he turns on the narrow couch to pull Will's thin body against him, wrap him in legs and arms and rest his lips parted against his brow.

"Yes," he murmurs. "Small ones, that wind through the trees, from a river not much further beyond."

He lifts a hand and stills its shaking against Will's hair, to sweep it back from his face.

"We will go. The air is crisp here, in the mountains, far removed."

From the city, from the people, from the life they once lived that now passes in a steady flow of memory behind them.

"I will take you, tomorrow, if you would like to see it."

Will considers. The mountains.

Patapsco, perhaps.

Or Calvert Cliffs.

Far from the beaten tracks, of course, a place that perhaps he had found, or had built, one of many to hide in, one of many to live in unseen.

Will almost pities the police department that they have not looked here. Wonders for a moment if they had and he just doesn't remember. Wonders if they had been part of the stew a week ago, part of the roast yesterday evening, and he realizes he cannot bring himself to care, he cannot bring himself to worry and retch and condemn the man curled around him like Will is the only thing on this earth worth doing anything for.

Perhaps he is.

Will hums softly, says nothing for a long time, content to rest as he's held, having missed the contact, the touch, the closeness. Having missed the man he had tried so hard to save, once, to lose, after, and who had allowed him neither.

He thinks of that early morning, having barely slept at all, seen only bodies and blood and heavy antlers suspending them from his reach. He thinks of how the knock had woken him, how he had considered not responding, perhaps they would leave, perhaps they should, and thinks of how surprised he had been when Hannibal had stood there, casually dressed and awake, hair just barely mussed to make himself appear younger, softer, somehow.

He had asked to come in, and Will had let him.

Will still wonders, some days, if Hannibal would have come in regardless. Not then, but another day, at Wolf Trap, silent as a shadow and just as elusive. He wonders if he would have responded, if he would have sent him away or allowed him in even then.

Perhaps he was always going to.

A continuous mathematical phenomenon, always returning to the same pattern, same choices, same routines over and over no matter how broken, how bent; from all angles it would remain inarguable. Continuous. Identical.

"*Can I come in?*"

Yes.

Always yes.

"*God forbid we become friendly.*"

I don't find you that interesting.

Will swallows, presses closer, presses his face against Hannibal's heated skin, against the stubble there, against his smell and his warmth that he has missed and ached for and finally has again.

Will you drink, Will?

Will you eat?

"I will," he murmurs, answering so many questions at once with a single sigh.

Because it doesn’t matter if he forces the matter now, tries to change the narrative.

Fractals always repeat.

End Notes

Formatting choices are on me (Whiskey) and were a b!tch to edit in. Christ I hope they work and people get a good sense of how disorienting everything is.

(and a note from Blood before Whiskey can stop me - she absolutely *killed* this piece with taking it to far wilder and more unexpected places than either of us could have predicted. I am so happy to have been co-pilot on this one alongside such jaw-dropping literary maneuvers)

Comments are always loved. Kudos are adored. Bookmarks revered and shares met with worship and happy puppy whining.

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